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PAGAN ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIANITY; AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS.

IN CHRISTIANITY we must distinguish between the underlying thought of a saviour and the belief in Jesus of Nazareth as having been this saviour. The latter is now known under the name of Christianity, but it is ideally and to a great extent at least in Protestant countries also actually a Jesuanity, viz., a Church institution based on Jesuism, i. e., the personal teachings of Jesus.

The ideas of Christ and Christianity existed before Jesus, and the Christianity of the Church was one form only of Christianity among many others; and that many other Christianities existed is evident from the fact of the various Christ-conceptions which are offered in both canonical and Apocryphal books—not to mention the innumerable pagan saviours and redeemers, gods such as Hermes Trismegistos, Hercules, Æsculapius, Mithras, etc., and men such as Apollonius of Tyana. We must bear in mind that the traditions which are still extant are only isolated *débris* saved by accident from the general deluge of all non-Christian religions.

The term “Christ” in the sense of Saviour makes its first appearance in history in the Septuagint and the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament. It translates the term Messiah and occurs twice in the Psalms of Solomon (xvii. 36 and xviii. 8). St. Paul applies it to Jesus in his Epistles, and he too regards the term as a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, the Anointed One. Nevertheless, the derivation is doubtful, for the Anointed One would be *χριστός*, or *κεχριμένος*, or *χρισθείς*. The form *χριστός* or *χριστός* is a gerund which means “he who is about to be or

ought to be anointed."¹ Consequently it cannot very well mean the Messiah, but only the one who will become the Messiah.

Justin Martyr, of the second century, occasionally uses the form *χρηστός* for *χριστός* and alludes to its significance as "the useful, the serviceable, the good."

Some have tried to connect the word *Christus* with Krishna. Now it is true that a few Krishna legends (e. g., the massacre of the innocents) and some features of the Krishna birth-festivals were practically identical with legends accepted by the early Christians,² and we must grant that Krishna-worship had reached Syria and Egypt, but there is not the slightest positive evidence in favor of the assumption that the name itself should have been used in the sense of God-man and Saviour, and still less that Krisnos became changed into Christos. We deem the etymology of the word Christ to be an open question.³

The Book of Enoch, the main part of which was probably written about 144 B. C., does not regard the Messiah as a man but as a divine personality, a prince among the angelic host,—one who ranks above all the angels, yet is not quite equal in dignity to God. Jewish tradition has the conception of such an angel, called Metathron, who stands at God's side near his throne to execute His will.

The Books of Ezra propound another saviour-conception, which is, however, as little conformable as that of Enoch to the Jesus-Christianity which remained victorious in the end. The Jesus-Christianity originated under other conceptions of a messiah through a peculiar combination of definite historical circumstances,

¹ The verb *χρίειν* means "to rub"; i. e., lightly to touch the surface of a body; "to bedaub." It is commonly used in the sense of smearing the body with oil, as the Greeks were used to do after a bath. But the idea of "rubbing" is fundamental. The word acquired the meaning of anointing as an act of consecration only through its use in the Bible, and it is probable that no one save a Jew would have translated Messiah by *χριστός* or any other derivative of *χρίειν*.

² See Prof. A. Weber's article on the Krishna birthday-festival. Engl. transl. in the *Indian Antiquary*, June, October, and December, 1877.

³ The formation of the word *χριστιανός*, or Latin *Christianus*, is a solecism which can scarcely have occurred before the last decade of the first century. For further details of the mooted question see R. A. Lepsius, *Ueber den Ursprung und ersten Gebrauch des Christennamens*. 1873.

and embodying in itself all those traits of other Christianities which possessed a practical and moral significance, it grew in breadth and was thus enabled to survive. But the strangest thing is that the New Testament contains a book with passages based upon a Christ-conception that knows nothing of Jesus of Nazareth, nothing of the Atonement through death on the cross, nothing of the details of the Jesus-worship preached by Paul, set forth in the four Gospels, and sustained in the epistles of the various apostles.

This Christ-conception, utterly incompatible with the Jesus of the New Testament, is contained in the Revelation of St. John, chapter xii., which (if viewed from the standpoint of the old and uncritical school of theology) is one of the obscurest passages in the Christian canon.

Recent investigations have thrown much light on the significance of the text. Several theologians of the critical school have recognised the non-Christian (or rather un-Jesuanic) origin of this passage in Revelation xii. But Professor Gunkel has finally succeeded in explaining the significance of these strange traditions.

The Saviour is represented in the twelfth chapter of the Revelation as being born in Heaven (not in Bethlehem or anywhere on earth), and he is at once attacked by a dangerous dragon; the child is rescued and taken to the throne of God, while the unfortunate mother is persecuted by the monster. The dragon in his wrath throws down one third of the stars in Heaven, and a combat ensues between Michael and the dragon. Later on, in the continuation of the prophecy, which is found in chapter xix., the child reappears as a hero who fulfils the prophecy (chapter xii. 5) that he will govern the nations with a rod of iron and found the kingdom of God on earth by a most terrible slaughter of the Gentiles. During the infancy of the Saviour, the dragon is at liberty to do much harm, and the time of tribulation is near, but the victorious conqueror is expected and will at last vanquish the monster of the deep.

All attempts to reconcile this picture of the Saviour with that given of Jesus in the Gospels have failed. The woman who is the mother of the Saviour appears in Heaven adorned with celestial insignia, not as Mary of the tribe of Levy and betrothed to Joseph,

but as a deity of Heaven, like those described in pagan mythologies, standing on the moon and crowned with the zodiac, a wreath of the twelve constellations. Nothing is mentioned of the Crucifixion, nothing of the Resurrection, nothing of the preaching of the Word on earth, nothing of the miracles of Jesus, of healing the sick and restoring the dead to life.

That the religion of the prophet who wrote the passage in the twelfth chapter of Revelation is not the Christianity of the four canonical Gospels is obvious, and we have here the remarkable phenomenon of a Christianity which lacks utterly all those significant features which characterise the humanity of Jesus and his special fate in life. We are apparently confronted in this passage with one of the relics of a pre-Christian Christianity, such as it existed among the pagans with whom the Jews came into contact.

Professor Gunkel has proved that the essential features of this pre-Christian Christianity of the twelfth chapter of Revelation are nothing but a recital of the Marduk myth. But genesis has become here eschatology. The report as to the origin of the world is applied to the end of all things and to the renewal of the universe. The chaotic conditions of the age, in which the elect of God suffer and the unbelievers triumph, will be reversed and a new heaven and a new earth will be created, for which the resurrection of the dead is promised and a general restitution assured. The channels through which the old Marduk myth has been transferred to Jewish writers can perhaps no longer be traced back to their sources, but we can plainly recognise Zoroastrian influences and the Persian views of the virgin-born saviour who will found the kingdom of God on earth.

The age was well adapted to eschatological contemplations. Under the influence of ancient prophecies dating back to the Babylonian period, and repeated in purified form in the Zoroastrian writings, a whole flood of apocalyptic literature appeared in which the Jews dreamed of a restitution of the Jewish race and a fulfilment of their national ideals. The oldest of these revelations, Daniel, set the example, and most of them breathed a spirit of bloodthirstiness and revenge. They are written by a race that has

suffered greatly from oppression and persecution ; and the truly Christian spirit is utterly absent in them. This, no doubt, is the reason why in the general competition of religious ideas which in those days moved the world, that form of Christianity which is exhibited in the twelfth chapter of the Revelation of St. John failed and was superseded by the other Christianity which, as stated above, might properly be called *Jesuanity*.

One question remains : How was it possible that this chapter could be incorporated into the canonical writings of the New Testament? The answer seems to be this : First, the un-Jesuanic character of the Revelation of St. John is not so obvious as to be at once perceptible to a person reading these chapters or copying them for preservation. They are intermingled with a conglomeration of other chapters full of mysterious hints and prophecies which tend to conceal their true significance. The final redactor of the book knew of the existence of Judaistic Christian congregations in Asia Minor, and there can be no doubt about their anti-Pauline character ; yet the opposition made to the apostle Paul is not made openly, but indirectly, by allusions which rendered it possible that it could at last be received into the canon, in spite of its anti-Gentile tendency.

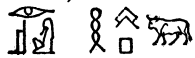
Being canonised, it escaped the fate of suppression when another form of Christianity survived in the general struggle for religious supremacy. Any one who can judge impartially between the two religions must confess that this Marduk-Christianity was bound to succumb in the competition with the nobler, and morally deeper, Christianity of Jesus the Nazarene. The Marduk-Christ is a mythological figure, a god of the ancient Babylonian fairy-tale world, but Jesus of Nazareth is a man, an aspiring, suffering, and down-trodden martyr. There the divinity of the conqueror is grotesque, here it is human ; and because it is truly human, it was felt to be truly divine.

In addition to the Marduk Christianity of Babylon, preserved in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, there are Egyptian conceptions of Christ, and even here the name Christ is attested by good authority.

We learn through Sozomenes and Socrates the Church historian, that the cross was used as a prominent symbol (probably the Egyptian *crux ansata*, the key of life) in the temples of Serapis, and Emperor Hadrian writes in a letter to the Consul Servianus:

"Those who worship Serapis are Christians, and those who are especially consecrated to Serapis call themselves the bishops of Christ."

The Rev. Robert Taylor in his *Diegesis*, p. 205, believes that the use of the word Christ is a confusion due to the fear of persecution, and that many Christians, to escape martyrdom, professed to be Serapis worshippers. But the case is the reverse. Not Christians call themselves Serapis worshippers, but Serapis worshippers claim to be Christians. The Emperor's expression does not admit the interpretation that the name Christian was disowned, and we have only the choice that either there was a confusion of these two religions in the mind of the Emperor, or there was actually a class of people in Egypt who worshipped Serapis under the name of Christ.

Serapis is the god of the other world, the life to come. The word is a contraction of Osiris-Apis  Ausar Hapi, i. e., the apis as Osiris, and he was worshipped as lord of the dead.

The Serapis cult was a Hellenised form of the ancient Osiris worship introduced by King Ptolemy Soter for the purpose of reconciling his Greek and Egyptian subjects. A monastery was connected with the Serapæum at Memphis, as we know from papyri found on the spot, and Christian monks adopted some features of the habits of these monks of Serapis. It is certainly not accidental that the institutions of Christian monks originated in Egypt.

Christianity as the faith of the Church is a belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, and the life of Jesus as told in the Gospels has exercised a paramount influence upon the formation of the creed. Nevertheless, several of its main ideas were added to from other sources. Christianity is not pure Jesuism; Christianity is the religious life of the pre-Christian ages focused round the idealised figure of Jesus. Jesuism is the dominant factor of Christianity; but some of the rays collected from other quarters are not merely accessory. Jesus is the center of crystalisation, determin-

ing the interpretation of the various elements that were assimilated, but some of the more essential thoughts of Christianity are not found in the doctrines of Jesus and must be regarded as independent accretions which on account of their vital importance in the minds of the people naturally and necessarily were incorporated in the new system.

Among such later accretions coming from sources of pre-Christian religions are the dogma of the trinity, the conception of the sacraments, the incarnation idea, the doctrine of vicarious atonement with its peculiar scheme of salvation.

The idea of vicarious atonement, which underlies the sacrificial cult of Paganism as well as Judaism, reappears in the interpretation of Christ's death. Although Christianity is in a certain sense reactionary, in *de jure* recognising the necessity of human sacrifices, it is *de facto* progressive, for instead of continuing the barbarous practice, it served to abolish bloody sacrifices for good. Similarly the superstition of the ceremonial cannibalism of the savage age (based on the thought that by eating the flesh of any creature or by drinking its blood we partake of the powers of which it is possessed) was revived in Christianity, but it became a mere symbol and obtained a deeper and spiritualised significance. The divinity of the ideal man, representing the civil order and the moral welfare of the community, so vigorously insisted upon in the deification of the Roman emperor, found expression in the dogma of the God-man Christ. These thoughts assumed a more ideal aspect under the humaner ethics and the loftier philosophy of the age which rejected the idolatry of the past and began to look upon God as the one deity, the father of all, who with the same love embraces the noblest as well as the meanest of his creatures.

The trinity, or rather tri-unity of God, which is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament, was even in its purer forms quite common among the philosophers in the age of Jesus. Thus, for instance, the *Chronicon Alexandrinum*, explains the name "Hermes Trismegistos," (Ἑρμῆς τρισμέγιστος), who in Egyptian mythology is Thoth, the scribe of the gods. He is regarded as the revealer of divine mysteries and a shepherd or pastor of mankind (ποιμάνδρης);

thereupon it proceeds to make the following statement: "Hermes declared that there are three greatest powers (*δυνάμεις*), but he said that the name of the Ineffable and the world-building God (*δημιουργοῦ θεοῦ*) consisted in one divinity. . . . Therefore he was called by the Egyptians thrice-greatest Hermes."

The thrice-greatest does not mean the triple-greatest, but it indicates a reverence for the number three. The quotation proves, however, that the name Hermes Trismegistos and the trinity doctrine of Hermetic literature must be older than the *Chronicum Alexandrinum*, but there is a strong probability that this notion as well as other ideas set forth in the Divine Pyramider of Hermes Trismegistos have been derived from ancient Egyptian sources.

The word "power" or *δύναμις* is also used in the New Testament in connection with Simon Magus whose doctrine of the trinity is remarkable for its purity and philosophical grasp.

The doctrine of the God-child Hor, who was worshipped as a saviour and as a promise of resurrection in Egypt, is very near to the Christian conception of God the Son.

Nothing was absolutely new in Christianity, yet the whole setting was original, and in this new synthesis the traditional religions were purified and their barbarous features were, at least in their practical application, abolished. The more we consider the conservatism of mankind, the better we shall understand that the simplest and most effective way of abolishing ancient rites such as atonement by blood, was by granting their propriety for the past, by claiming them to be fulfilled, and thus abolishing them for good, without denying their justice.

In spite of the great progress which Christianity denotes in history, we cannot fail to see that early Christianity was by no means so ideal as it appears to the Christian romancer, for on the contrary, early Christianity contains many superstitious notions which cannot be reconciled with its great humanitarian and universalistic ideals that form the leaven in the dough of mankind.

But the most important idea of Christianity is the belief in the immortality of the soul, and here we must observe the noteworthy fact that this doctrine is glaringly absent in the Old Testament.

Although the Hebrew canon contains many traditions, notions, and beliefs which can be traced to pagan sources, be it in Egypt or in Mesopotamia, there is a decided contrast between the spirit of the Old Testament and the religious literature of the Babylonians and other nations. The Hebrew prophets and the priests of the second temple are iconoclastic monotheists and haters of myth in any form. Thus, they have rationalised the creation myth, the story of Marduk's fight with the dragon, the legends of Samas the sun-god, changing him into a hero and a judge called Samson, etc.; and in doing this they passed over in silence the belief in immortality, or, wherever it is alluded to, we can still recognise unmistakable hints condemning the pagan conception of life after death.

The objection which is made to the belief in immortality by the canonical authors of the Old Testament seems strange to us, who have acquired the custom of reading the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of the New Testament doctrines, among which the belief in immortality is the keystone of religion. But we shall understand the situation better when we consider the intimate connexion of the belief in immortality among the Babylonians with the worship of Tammuz and Istar. The wailing for Tammuz was a kind of All Souls' day, and the hope of the bereaved for a restoration of their beloved dead to life was based upon myths and celebrated with idolatrous incantations (probably after the fashion of modern mediums) which were an abomination to the sober and rationalist Yahvist.¹

Christianity not only abandoned the Jewish policy of ignoring the problem of immortality, but denotes a decided restoration of pagan beliefs in a new and higher form.

When Christianity spread over Syria, the religious ceremony of lamentation for the death of Tammuz and rejoicings for his revival were changed into Christian festivals, viz., into the lamentation on Good Friday for the death of Christ and on other occasions into a celebration of the death and resurrection of Lazarus. The old

¹ See the author's article "The Babylonian and Hebrew Views of Man's Fate After Death" in *The Open Court*, 1901, pp. 346-366.

pagan belief and even the story itself continued in the imagination of the people, but under different names.

Pagan ideas were critically revised and chastened in the furnace of Jewish monotheism, and the result was Christianity. Thus the saying of St. Augustine remains true that Christianity, the new religion that so suddenly conquered the Roman Empire and crowded out Greek and Roman mythology, was, after all, an ancient institution which had existed from time immemorial.

There are many indications of a fierce struggle between the several forms of Christianity, but the result was no accident. The Jesus-Christianity proved victorious as soon as it became known in the world, first through the Apostle Paul and then in the shape in which it was presented in the Gospels. It rejected everything that collided with its essential doctrines, but assimilated freely whatever could be reconciled with the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus being a historical fact and a human saviour, a suffering man and flesh of our flesh, was finally recognised as the only Christ. All other Christ-conceptions were abandoned and doomed to oblivion. The myths of Marduk, of Tammuz, of Thoth, of Osiris, of Horus the god-son, and further of the great mother of life, the Queen of Heaven, and other pagan stories, are products of deep human sentiments. They are as significant as is the awe inspired by the idea of the creation of the world, the yearning for life immortal, the respect for *das ewig Weibliche*. But literal belief in the myth led to superstition and aberrations which needed constant purification. Thus the Judaistic suppression of these rituals is as much justified as is the broader spirit of reinstating them. The rise of Christianity in Judæa may very well be regarded as a reaction, for it is practically the restoration of the most essential pagan beliefs in a new and monotheistic form. Considering the power of the hope of immortality and the fascination of the more poetic forms of pagan worship, we believe it was an inevitable phase in the history of the religious evolution of mankind. But Christianity, although it was nourished by aspirations which have their roots in pagan soil, is not a mere reversion to paganism; it is after all a new epoch in the history of mankind. Though it contains ingredients which can be traced back to the traditions of a hoary antiquity, it is a distinctly new movement; and the event which becomes its center and dominating factor, constituting its originality, is the life of Jesus.